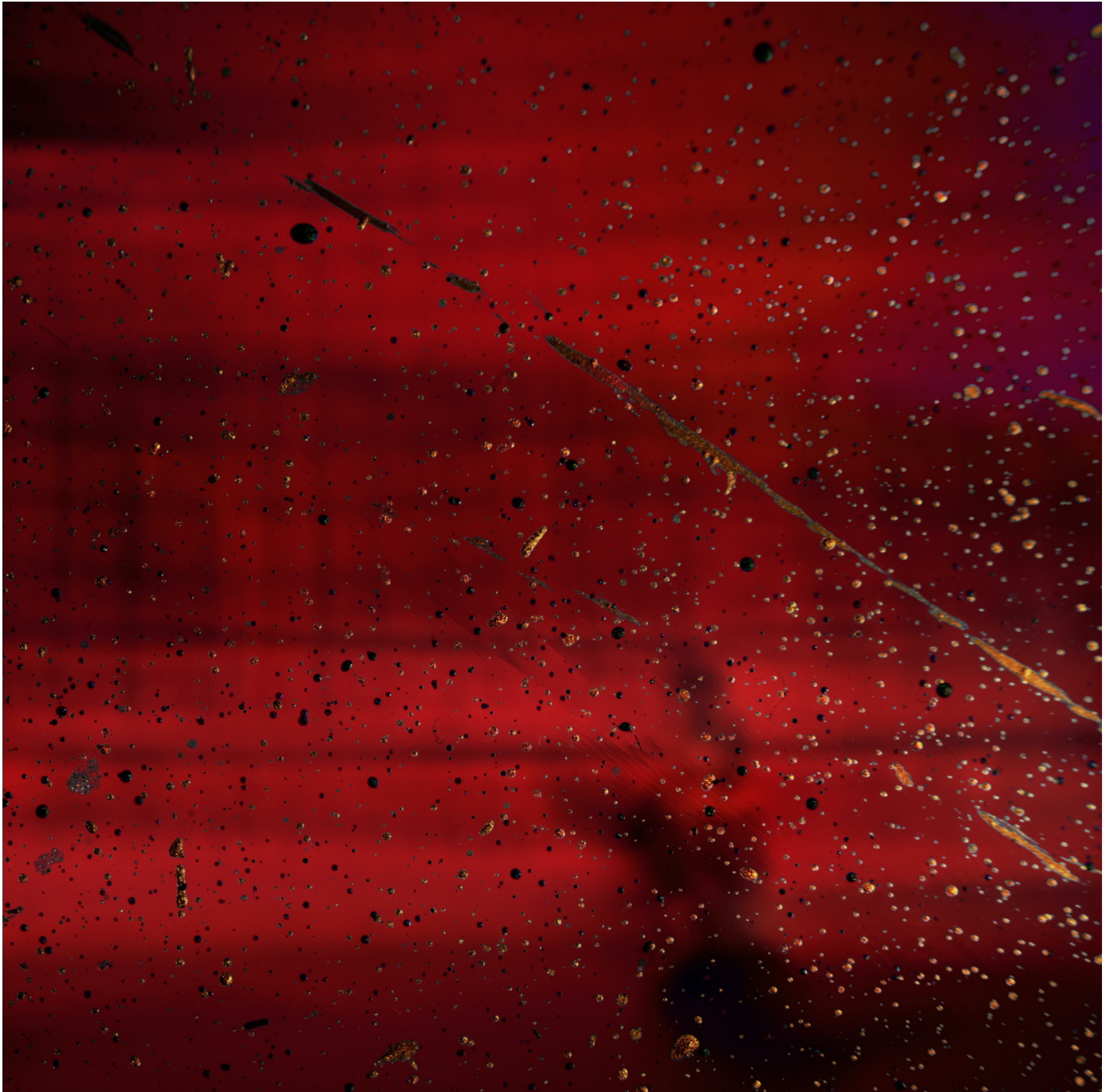




# RELIGION & CULTURE

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# *In Conversation*

*With Sarah Imhoff  
Indiana University, Bloomington*

## **Participants:**

*Sarah Imhoff (Indiana University, Bloomington)*

*Lindsey Jackson (Concordia University)*

In September 2019, the *Journal of Religion and Culture* invited Dr. Sarah Imhoff from Indiana University, Bloomington to the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University to discuss her forthcoming tentatively titled book, *A Queer Crippled Zionism*. Imhoff's work analyzes the intersection between religion, disability, embodiment, and queerness. The main subject of the work is Jessie Sampter – a prolific writer, intellectual, and Zionist born in New York City in 1883. Sampter assumed a prominent role in the Zionist movement in both the United States and Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, penning several books on Zionism and eventually moving to Palestine in 1919. Sampter's commitment to Zionism, an ideology that venerated strong bodies and celebrated women's reproductive abilities, was deeply at odds with her own life and experiences. Crippled<sup>1</sup> by polio, never marrying or having biological children of her own, and living a queer life with another woman and her adopted daughter, Sampter's life hardly matched the Zionist ideal. Imhoff's work interrogates this tension and examines the ways in which one's embodied self does not always neatly align with one's political or religious ideals.

During her visit to Montreal, Dr. Imhoff was interviewed by Concordia PhD candidate Lindsey Jackson to delve more deeply into the life of Jessie Sampter.

*LJ: How did you first hear of Jessie Sampter and why did you want to write a book about her?*

SI: Jessie Sampter shows up in a few books on American Jewish history, but she's usually used as an example of something and in service to a larger point about women in American Judaism. When I was writing my first book on American Jewish masculinity, I wanted to include women's voices about masculinity because it's not just men who think about masculinity. I knew of Jessie Sampter because of those few references to her I encountered during my research for that project. I went to the Central Zionist Archives, where many of her letters and papers are, and looked for examples of how she might describe American Jewish masculinity, particularly in reference to Zionism. She didn't turn out to be super useful for that purpose, but she fascinated me. I decided at that point that I would write an article about this woman, I'll come back and look at these materials again, and then suddenly I was writing a book about her.

*LJ: In the introduction you call this book a “weird biography.” What exactly do you mean by that?*

SI: It's weird for a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons is because we traditionally imagine a biography as chronological. The book is not chronological, it's thematic. Each of the chapters tells Sampter's story in a different way. The first chapter tells her story as a story about American religion. The second tells her story as a story about disability. The third chapter thinks about what it means to tell her story as a queer life. The fourth chapter thinks about theology and politics, and the last chapter examines her afterlives. When I say afterlives I mean the ways she has been appropriated or used and ways that she's disappeared.

*LJ: Why is Jessie Sampter's life worthy of a biography and what challenges did you face in writing the book thematically rather than chronologically?*

SI: I didn't ever imagine that I would be writing a biography. One of the reasons why I decided this would be a worthy project is that Sampter is fascinating not just for the details of her own life, but because of what she can tell us about bigger questions. Her stories were a way into a bigger set of questions I see as important in religious studies especially—questions about the relationship of embodied lives and religious ideas and ideals.

It was quite challenging writing the book thematically. There were lots of episodes in her life, other people in her life, even particular documents that she wrote, or pieces of books, poems, or essays that could have naturally fit in two or three places so I had to make those decisions. The other thing that I continue to hold as a serious concern is that Jessie lived her life, and she understood it to be a single life, so I don't want it to appear that religion is somehow separate from disability, or that disability is separate from having a queer family. I tried to show those connections among the chapters but that remains something I think about.

*LJ: Let's segue into talking about religion and disability. Can you unpack the connection between religion and disability?*

SI: Here I find Darla Schumm's work really helpful. She's done ethnographic work in US churches that talks about the ways other people, not people with disabilities, imagine people with disabilities. We often see two main paradigms, and one of them rests on the belief that people with disabilities did something to bring on their disability. If someone has Type 2 diabetes, a chronic illness associated with smoking, HIV – those are really

obvious ones. There is a lot of precedent for understanding disability as a punishment or something you or your ancestors did. The other version of that, the flip side of it, and these can sometimes work together, is that a person with a disability is especially close to God. They're a little bit saintly. Their suffering makes them a little like Jesus. Shumm's work shows how this operates in churches and religious spaces, but you can also see this in a lot of secular spaces. We see this in the way the Paralympics are advertised. The athletes are depicted as overcoming obstacles, magical, or even saintly. You can see this paradigm presented in spaces that are not necessarily religious also. If you spend time in hospitals you would hear a lot of the same talk from both hospital employees and family members. Even family members who would not call themselves religious would use this kind of language.

*LJ: Did Jessie Sampter see herself in either of these ways?*

SI: Interestingly, no. Sampter is not a person who thinks that suffering is particularly redemptive and she certainly didn't see herself as a sinner who brought on something she deserved, especially considering she had a childhood illness. Also, that wouldn't have made sense with the rest of her theology in which she doesn't really understand a personal God who's tweaking what's going on in the lives of each individual person.

*LJ: You use the word "cripple" and "crip" in your work. Why did you use this word?*

SI: I went back and forth about this because "cripple" has been used as a derogatory term. But "crip" and "cripple" have been reclaimed by many disability activists and scholars in ways that I can see resonance with



Sampter. Also, Sampter calls herself crippled and there is something affecting about hearing that language that helps us understand how she saw herself and perhaps how other people in society saw her. I think it's useful for those reasons. I also call her a person with a disability. I use that language too. I think that for both historical and for the contemporary reasons of it being reclaimed, it helps us understand something that we wouldn't understand if I didn't use it. That's not to say that I'm without trepidation. People who are not part of that discourse might think I am using cripple in a derogatory sense. I just hope people who are not familiar with this discourse engage a little further to fully understand what the term is doing in the book and that it's not a slur.

*LJ: You mention that disability theorists rarely examine the connection between religion and disability. Can you unpack why disability theorists tend to disregard religion in their work?*

SI: I think there are a number of reasons why disability theorists have not taken religion seriously. One is that very few of them have training in religious studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson wrote a really great chapter that thinks a little bit about religion and disability but that's not a theme that runs through all of her work. Other scholars, like Robert McRuer, spend little time on it or are a little dismissive of it. I think this is for a couple of reasons. One of the reasons is crip theory specifically has modelled itself in many ways on queer theory. For many reasons, some of which are quite legitimate, queer theory has a suspicion of religion. There are lots of ways religious institutions and leaders have marginalized queer people. This is also true for disability studies but it is not wholly true and it is certainly not true in exactly the same ways. We also see in gender studies that religion tends to be viewed as the opiate of the

masses and religion as a way to oppress women, queer people, and anyone who is different. I think that's part of the reason why religion tends to be unexamined in some disciplines.

*LJ: How did Jessie Sampter engage with religion and what can we discern from her example vis-à-vis religion and religious praxis in the United States more broadly?*

SI: In Sampter's own life, when she imagines the world, she draws on a number of traditions. She reads the transcendentalists, but she also draws strongly on the Bible, she reads the New Testament and leads discussions about it with young teenagers, she participates in a séance and doesn't quite decide what she thinks about it but certainly doesn't think it is nonsense. Even though she identified as Jewish, the way she understood the world was that different religious traditions have different and important things to say, profound things about how the world is, how we know things, and what relationships we should be in with one another and with the world. This is a feature of a lot of people's religious ideas and ideals. For example, the number of Christians doing yoga without worrying that it's something different or worshipping another god, or engaging in religious practice from a "rival" religion is quite large in the US. I don't think Christians who do yoga are hypocrites. I think they imagine that "truth" comes from different places. They also might imagine that if they don't believe in another god then doing yoga for them isn't a religious ritual or activity, even though it is partaking in Hindu traditions. I see Sampter as a more obvious and articulate example of the way that many people, both then and today, have a worldview that engages multiple religious traditions without believing what they're doing is fragmented or hypocritical.

*LJ: You use interesting language to describe this phenomenon, such as “religious border crossing” and “religious recombination.” Why do you use this language to describe Sampter’s religious practices and views?*

SI: I was looking for a good metaphor that didn’t imply that there is such a thing as separate, distinct religions. I wanted a metaphor that would allow us to understand that people can draw from multiple places and not end up with something fragmented at the end. I actively avoid using terms like “cafeteria religion” and “do-it-yourself” religion because I think they are condescending. Terms like these imply that people are selfish and that they are somewhat benighted, meaning they don’t understand that these religions are really different and they can’t have them together. Sure, there is an aspect of that, but I don’t think individual Christians who believe in karma or Christians who go to yoga are not really Christians, or less good Christians, which is what those terms imply.

*LJ: You mention in the book that not only did you read Sampter’s writings and the writings of her associates, you also embodied her by doing some of the things she would do, such as growing certain plants, visiting places that were important to her, and so on. What did you learn about Sampter by doing some of the things she would do?*

SI: Because I work on religion and the body, I am conscious of the way we know stuff through our bodies. We know stuff through our intellect but we also know stuff through our bodies. For example, we know when it’s hot, we know what something smells like, or we know how frustrating it is when you plant a bunch of seeds and only a few of them turn out. Not that I imagine you can bridge historical distance and I experienced what Sampter experienced – I reject that. I didn’t experience

what she experienced. But I do think that being in the places she was helped me understand how they might be both nourishing and challenging for a body. Similarly, doing something like gardening makes you realize it’s a long-term commitment, and if you miss a week your plants suffer and maybe they die. You pay attention to the weather in a way that you probably wouldn’t have otherwise. What that embodied practice did for me was point my intellectual awareness to other things. I will also say that I started out engaging in these embodied practices not knowing if it would be useful because from the beginning I strongly believed that I wasn’t experiencing what she experienced. I can’t somehow transcend time. I can’t have her experiences. But I do think I learned from my own embodied experiences. I read her letters differently at times. For example, when she’s talking about the rest house at Givat Brenner<sup>2</sup>, I know what that looks like, I know it’s kind of up on a hill, I can see where the original gardens were, I know how people talked about how they were beautiful. I think it makes me a better narrator in some ways, to have some of those details and it pointed me, even intellectually, to things that might not have registered as important or interesting.

*LJ: How was Jessie’s life a queer one?*

SI: I thought a lot about terminology here because I don’t have evidence that Jessie Sampter had sex with women, but her life included two modes of being that I think of as queer. One of them is queer desire. In some of her unpublished writing, she expresses sexual desire for women. Not women in general, particular women, and more than one. The other one is queer kinship. In this way it seems to me very useful to think of her life as queer. She spent much of her adult life living with Leah Berlin. They made financial decisions together, she knew



Leah's family very well, and they all lived together when Leah's family first came to Palestine. Jessie also adopted a Yemenite Jewish girl named Tamar. When Tamar was away at school, Leah would go visit her, especially if Jessie wasn't feeling up to traveling. The two women made the decision to live on Givat Brenner together and it was clear from the beginning that when the members of Givat Brenner were deciding if they were going to be allowed it was going to be both of them or neither of them. In pretty much every way, Sampter's family in Palestine was Leah Berlin and Tamar, her daughter, and that's a queer family. This did not mean she was wholly cut off from her family of origin. She continued to be close with her sister Elvie; they sent letters back and forth. Sampter wrote Elvie a letter every week during the whole time she lived in Palestine. She also has biological kinship in that way but that's also what we see that happens with queer families – there is a mix of a family of origin and a chosen family.

*LJ: Why didn't Sampter become a well-known Zionist like other American Zionists of the time?*

SI: There are a few reasons, one of the main ones I think is she didn't meet a set of gendered expectations. There's a great book by Mary McCune about women Zionists and in it she quotes Henrietta Szold, who is probably the most well-known American Jewish Zionist woman, who famously claimed that male leadership seemingly wanted women for their participation but not their political opinions.<sup>3</sup> This is a long way of saying the gendered expectations of men was that they could be the intellectuals, the thinkers, the planners, and women would be the ones in charge of ensuring that children were cared for and the newest hygienic practices were brought to Palestine, education was appropriate, and hospitals were created. These things were seen as

appropriate for Zionist women, but Jessie Sampter wasn't a nurse, she didn't work in a hospital, she didn't participate in the handing out of milk. She was an intellectual and that was seen as a male bastion. Another reason, and this is a more speculative one, but when people, especially women, don't have living descendants to talk about their own importance, sometimes it's easier for them to get lost. Sampter does have Tamar's family, but they're in Israel, not in the United States, and American Zionists are not often seen as the major, important Zionists. It's fascinating to me because she's connected to so many of the important, famous people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, but she herself is not widely known.

*LJ: Although Jessie Sampter isn't memorialized in the same way as other Zionists, she makes appearances in some odd places, like in Weight Watchers booklets and a road sign in rural India. What this tells us about how we remember historical figures?*

SI: This tells us something about the information age and the way you can pick and choose small things without knowing anything about where they came from. You can decontextualize and recontextualize. That's not new, we see this in ancient sources, but that's certainly facilitated by the Internet. It's important to remember that we don't always get memorialized as whole people; people can appear through a quote on a sign or on the last page of the Weight Watchers "quote of the day" book with no other evidence about who this person was or why they were important. I'm not making an ethical judgment but it's helpful to remember that sometimes people get remembered in decontextualized ways.

*LJ: To end on a broad note, what are you working on now?*

SI: I'm not 100% sure this is going to happen but I think I'm going to work on a book about American Judaism, but taking the idea of "America" as not only the United States. So, what does it mean to take the idea of American Jews to include the US, Canada, Mexico, Latin America, the Caribbean? There are rich Jewish histories in these places but there are so many American Jewish histories, even when they are transnational or transnational between the US and Germany, or the US and Eastern Europe. Considering American Judaism in a hemispheric context, what it means to be Jewish in the Americas, is a framing that we have not yet considered.

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### *Notes*

1. I use the word "crippled" here to match the language and use of the term in Imhoff's book. Imhoff explains why she uses this terminology in her response to question six of the interview.
2. Givat Brenner is the kibbutz where Sampter lived after immigrating to Palestine.
3. For the specific quotation, see Mary McCune, *"The Whole Wide World Without Limits": International Relief, Gender Politics, and American Jewish Women, 1893-1930* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005): 39.

